

24<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Milton Branch  
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To:  
NSW Government Major Projects  
Warragamba Dam Raising  
Planning Portal

## **SUBMISSION – WARRAGAMBA DAM RAISING PROJECT – SSI-8441**

### **Summary**

- The National Parks Association – Milton Branch objects to the proposal to raise the wall of the Warragamba Dam.
- The reasons for objection are set out in the submission below. In summary the key objections are:
  - the project is fundamentally flawed;
  - it will lead to intolerable environmental impacts;
  - there is no consent from traditional owners and a lack of protection for cultural heritage;
  - the Environmental Impact Statement is unreliable and inaccurate;
  - and the concept of comparable biodiversity offsets for a World Heritage Listed area is fundamentally unsound.
- There is not any personal information in this submission that cannot be published online.
- The National Parks Association – Milton Branch has made no political donations in the previous two years – see attached political donations form.

### **Why is the proposed project important to the National Parks Association – Milton Branch?**

The Milton Branch is a non-government, non-political community-based organisation based in the Shoalhaven area of NSW. It is part of the NSW National Parks Association. As an organisation, the National Parks Association aims to present a balanced and fact-based commentary on key matters of interest to us and our community.

The Milton Branch has over 240 members and families and conducts regular bush walks in the Shoalhaven region and in NSW and organises educational events with a focus on the environment. Many of our members regularly visit the World Heritage listed Blue Mountain National Parks for a range of recreational activities including walking, biking and camping. We appreciate the magnificent natural environmental values of the Parks and their Aboriginal cultural heritage.

The National Parks Association – Milton Branch is concerned with the preservation and protection of our natural environment and its enjoyment by current and future generations. The Branch strongly believes that World Heritage listed areas and National Parks must be preserved intact for future generations.

### **A flawed project**

The project proposes to raise the wall of the Warragamba Dam based on the justification that raising the dam wall is required to reduce the risk of future flooding to residents and businesses across Western Sydney. This justification is flawed given the following considerations:

- Nearly half the floodwaters that have historically impacted the floodplain come from rivers outside the Warragamba catchment. Raising the dam wall will not address these other significant sources of floodwaters;
- Raising the dam wall will encourage further ill-advised development in vulnerable areas without providing any guarantee of future protection. Better urban planning and a combination of other flood mitigation strategies would be less destructive of World Heritage listed National Parks.
- There is a danger that if the dam wall raising goes ahead there will be pressure in future years, as Sydney's population continues to increase, for it to be used to permanently increase the area of inundation to increase Sydney's water supply.

### **Intolerable environmental impacts**

The World Heritage listed Blue Mountains National Parks have been given the highest possible international status and protection in recognition of the area's extraordinary biodiversity and ecological integrity. Australia is a signatory to the World Heritage Convention and required to do everything in its powers to protect the ecological integrity of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. This proposal falls far short of that obligation.

The purpose of raising the dam wall is to hold water at a level up to 17 metres higher than the present dam. Even if the water is only held at these elevated levels for a few months, the unavoidable reality is that some of the habitats, flora, fauna, and soils within the inundation zone will be irreversibly impacted.

It will adversely impact 5,700 hectares of National Parks, 1,300 hectares of World Heritage Area, more than 60 kilometres of wilderness rivers and thousands of Aboriginal sites and places of cultural significance.<sup>1</sup> These areas contain some of the best remaining grassy woodland ecosystem in NSW, complete with healthy populations of dingo, quoll, woodland birds and many other native species.

The rising water poses unacceptable risks to a number of threatened species of plants, animals and birds including NSW's rarest bird, the Regent Honeyeater. Birdlife Australia has estimated that the inundation from the raised dam wall could result in the loss of hundreds of hectares of breeding habitat important for the survival of the Regent Honeyeater for up to

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<sup>1</sup> National Parks Association of NSW, <https://npansw.org.au/2021/10/111>

5 weeks during a flood event.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, the specific habitat requirements of the Regent Honeyeater means that the birds cannot simply 'nest elsewhere' if key breeding habitat is lost – even temporarily. The loss of habitat would be detrimental to the viability of the species and the deliberate inundation or destruction of any remaining breeding habitat would contribute to the trajectory of extinction for the Regent Honeyeater.

### **Lack of consent from Traditional Owners and lack of protection for Cultural Heritage**

No consent has been obtained from the Gundungurra Traditional Owners for the work that will significantly impact their cultural heritage. The Commonwealth Department of Environment and the International Council on Monuments and Sites have both pointed out very serious failings in the assessment of the impact on the cultural heritage of the Gundungurra traditional owners.<sup>3</sup> One of the archaeologists employed as a consultant for the project has been reported by mainstream media outlets as stating that he was hired as a publicity stunt to win over traditional owners.<sup>4</sup>

The fallout from the desecration of Juunkan Gorge should serve as a warning signal to the NSW Government about the importance of protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage. It is telling that the Insurance Council of Australia has dropped its support for the project over fears for hundreds of Aboriginal sites.<sup>5</sup>

### **Unreliable and Inaccurate Environmental Impact Statement**

There have been disturbing reports in the mainstream media that throw strong doubt on the accuracy and integrity of the EIS. A leaked draft 2018 study into the environmental impacts of the proposal commissioned by SMEC consultants (who in turn were used as consultants by Water NSW) estimated that the affected World Heritage area would be more than four times that reported in the EIS.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, leaked documentation from within the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment indicate that staff were concerned that Water NSW was pushing its ecological consultants to downgrade dangers to threatened species from raising the Dam wall.<sup>7</sup> For example, it was reported in mainstream media that regarding a number of plant and animal species, SMEC said they were altering the phrase that the inundation would 'likely kill' to 'may adversely impact' a proportion of the population.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Birdlife Australia 'Inquiry into Proposal to Raise the Warragamba Dam Wall' submission to the Select Committee NSW Legislative Council, September 2019

<sup>3</sup> National Parks Association of NSW, <https://npansw.org.au/2021/10/111>

<sup>4</sup> Grossly Under-playing: Dam's impact to UNESCO area differs from leaked report' Sydney Morning Herald 29 September 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 'Grossly Under-playing: Dam's impact to UNESCO area differs from leaked report' Sydney Morning Herald 29 September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Grossly Under-playing: Dam's impact to UNESCO area differs from leaked report' Sydney Morning Herald 29 September 2021.

<sup>7</sup> 'Government staff feared dangers of Warragamba dam project were downgraded' Sydney Morning Herald 27 October 2021.

<sup>8</sup> 'Government staff feared dangers of Warragamba dam project were downgraded' Sydney Morning Herald 27 October 2021.

In addition, despite the EIS having been in preparation for more than 5 years, the environmental surveys on which it relies are inadequate. The EIS relies upon biodiversity surveys conducted before the unprecedented wildfires of 2019-20, which burnt vast tracts of the Greater Blue Mountains. Those fires changed the face of the Blue Mountains and drove many species to the brink of local extinction. It is not sufficient to do a 'desktop' analysis of the impacts of the fires on the project area.

The leaked report and departmental documentation, plus the failure to undertake new surveys after the wildfires, bring into serious question the underpinning validity of the entire EIS. It is not a reliable basis on which to make decisions about the project.

**The concept of biodiversity offsets for a World Heritage Listed area is fundamentally unsound**

The proposal relies upon the payment of biodiversity offsets to mitigate the environmental damage to the World Heritage listed Blue Mountains National Parks. However, in reality, given the uniqueness of the magnificent landscape and biodiversity of these parks it is not possible to offer up biodiversity offsets that are comparable. The concept that comparable offsets can be found is fundamentally unsound when dealing with areas that have been World Heritage listed. If the project was to proceed it is likely to be necessary to widen the search for offsets to include the preservation of other unique areas within broader NSW with the highest environmental and heritage values. This could extend, for example, to marine parks.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Warragamba Dam Raising project. We trust that you consider our concerns and objections. If you have any questions regarding our submission please contact Brigitte Nairn, President NPA Milton by email on [brigitten@npansw.org.au](mailto:brigitten@npansw.org.au) or on phone 0413 393 756

Yours sincerely



Brigitte Nairn

President

NPA NSW Milton Branch